

More than just a task

■ Though it often causes disruptions at work and home, jury duty is serious business

By STEPHEN FRYE
Of The Oakland Press

Seven weeks listening to medical testimony, legal rules and, at times, loud arguments.

That was a task seven Oakland County residents were handed after being called to jury duty on April 12. They were selected to hear the case of Nathan Laporte's family in a lawsuit against the hospital where the boy was burned as a baby seven years ago.

On May 27, with one juror having let his wife and child go on their vacation to Florida without him and another having

received a job offer that was held for her, none of the seven raised a hand when asked if they felt any animosity, disappointment or regret at having been picked.

"It's a terrible thing to be selected," the 37-year-old Waterford Township father and husband said of this particular case. "But somebody would be lying if they didn't find it interesting."

The jurors asked not to be named.

Though the man missed his vacation, Oakland Circuit Judge Gene Schnelz did hold off on deliberations for a day because the man had a work project — filming a commercial — already scheduled.

Another juror, a 24-year-old Farmington Hills woman, called

it "a really great experience."

Remember, it is called jury duty, perhaps one reason almost everyone's initial reaction might be to get out of it.

Though it is a time-consuming duty, jurors do get attached and involved with the cases they hear. In emotional criminal cases, jurors sometimes return for the sentencing, as two did recently with Jack Parker, who was convicted of murder after beating his girlfriend to death in Royal Oak.

For most, appearing for jury duty is simply a day lost or a chance to catch up on some reading. Jurors assemble in the massive jury room, where drink and snack machines join dozens of tables, on the first floor of the Oakland County courthouse.

They then go in groups — rang-

ing from 20 to 60 — to various courtrooms where needed.

Most return unselected and may go with other panels to other courts.

Last year, nearly 75,000 residents were randomly selected from driver's license and state identification records and summoned to serve as jurors in the Oakland County Circuit Court. Of those, 21,311 were told to report, and of those, just under 5,000 were impaneled. If seated, they are paid \$40 for each full day.

Court officials try to work with people, said Becky Young, jury supervisor.

A person who has been called in the past year, does not have to come in. Someone who has a

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JURY DUTY

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Debate rages on over whether employers should have to compensate jurors

scheduled trip or school can get up to a six-month delay. The job of Young and her staff includes covering the needs of the 23 judges who may require a panel for a trial and the needs of the pool.

Her staff checks with judges to find out if expected trials get canceled with a settlement. If so, potential jurors are sent home as soon as possible.

"We're very considerate of their time," Young said.

Some days are busy. Young said that the most juries seated in one day was 10.

In all cases, and at each step, jurors are randomly selected, a strict process that is not altered.

But for prospective jurors, time is money.

"I really think they should make employers pay for the time," said Janet Harthen of Troy, who was not selected to hear a felony firearm trial before Judge Steven Andrews in late May. "It would be a lot more fair."

She was sent home. But in her panel was Bachir Meftah, a Farmington Hills man who owns a manufacturing firm and was not selected. He said employers could not cover that cost.

"It's a public service," said Meftah, an employer. "The employer and employees should share the burden. It is an obligation."

Richard Chyette of Birmingham, also on that panel but not selected, was impressed with the preparation for jury duty at Oakland County Circuit Court, where a judge instructs the panel.

"The system doesn't work without jurors," said Chief Circuit Judge Wendy Potts. "They take the job so seriously. Even when they don't come up to the courtroom, they are valuable."

Most trials are not like the



The Oakland Press/GARY MALERBA

Jury office supervisor Becky Young of Davisburg addresses potential jurors on the ins and outs of jury duty at Oakland County Circuit Court.

Laporte case, instead lasting only a couple of days in most cases. For instance, during the final week of the Laporte case, Andrews held three criminal trials in the courtroom next door.

And a 51-year-old man hearing the Laporte case, who described finding the truth as being like doing a puzzle, said, "It's our civic duty. I think everybody should go through this — just once."